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THE ROLE OF THE SUBMARINE IN PRC NAVAL STRATEGY (U)

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CAPTAIN, U.S. NAVY
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THE ROLE OF THE SUBMARINE IN PRC NAVAL STRATEGY

ABSTRACT

(U) Chinese national objectives and naval strategy suggest that China has no current need for and does not intend to build SSNs, but rather that the first of several SSBNs may be in the offing.

(U) The cutoff date for information used in preparation of this study is 31 May 1974.

((Keywords: Chinese Communist, Coastal Defense, Defense of the Homeland, Deployment, G-I Class, HAN Class, SLBM, Shipbuilding, Pacific, South China Sea, Undersea Warfare))

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THE ROLE OF THE SUBMARINE IN PRC NAVAL STRATEGY

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I. CHINA'S NATIONAL OBJECTIVES

(U) At considerable expense and personal sacrifice, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is establishing itself as one of the world's leading military powers. This military build-up was undertaken as a necessary step in the realization of several national objectives. Generally speaking, these national objectives stem from the humiliation of subjection and defeat suffered by the Chinese during the past 150 years; a traditional sense of national pride recently nurtured as mainland China begins to be recognized internationally for its potential power, and the Chinese belief that China should play a central role in world affairs.

(U) Among the national objectives of the PRC which require a strong military are:

- A. To establish a territorial security,
- B. To achieve "superpower" status within the world community, and
- C. To be identified as the model for other Asian and developing countries and to be recognized as the leader of the "Third World" countries.

(U) In any discussion of China's territorial security it is not necessary to show imperialistic intent on the part of the United States or the Soviet Union, but simply to show that China sincerely believes a threat exists. The locations, deployments and defensive nature of China's military forces, her all out and sustained effort at developing nuclear weapons, and Peking's public declarations and announcements leave little doubt that China still fears for her territorial security.

(U) Theoretically, Peking has three alternative methods of achieving what might be called "nuclear security." The first - total and world wide nuclear disarmament - is very unlikely and has not been preached by Peking. The second - that of producing sophisticated nuclear weapons in such a quantity that nuclear parity could be achieved - is currently neither economically feasible nor timely. It may further be argued that such a solution is only necessary in a bipolar world. In a multi-power world there are other constraints

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and interactions such that the question of nuclear parity may take a back seat to world power relationships. The third alternative - that of developing a retaliatory capability which could survive a preemptive nuclear strike and inflict sufficient damage upon an adversary that potential enemies would consider that damage politically unacceptable - appears to present a feasible and cost-effective solution. The damage inflicted through retaliation might be physically tolerable but could nevertheless be psychologically, and therefore politically, unacceptable. Such damage could be inflicted by a small, inferior force and it is not difficult to imagine that Peking believes that even a small, Chinese nuclear retaliatory force would deter the "paper tiger" nations.

(U) It should not be inferred, however, that a viable nuclear deterrent would eliminate China's need for a significant strategic offensive capability. A retaliatory capability is a requirement for superpower status and substantially enhances territorial security, but only the threat from a Chinese strategic offensive system could eliminate interference from other superpowers in "local disputes" and wars of national liberation. Thus such a strategic offensive force is required to open new frontiers for Chinese influence and exploitation in underdeveloped countries.

II. PRC NAVAL STRATEGY IN SUPPORT OF NATIONAL OBJECTIVES

(U) China's emphasis on building a large, strong navy is historically justifiable, since the humiliating invasions which the Chinese have experienced during the past 150 years have occurred almost entirely by sea. Today the Soviet Union threatens to encircle China as Soviet ships roam freely off the China coast and become more at home in the Indian Ocean. Japan has the potential to once again become a great naval power and the impunity with which US warships roamed the Chinese coast during the Korean War, Taiwan Strait crisis and Vietnamese War have been continual reminders to Peking that her seaward borders require the protection of a powerful, modern navy. Today China's naval strategy continues to be the inherited policy of coastal defense; however, as her naval forces become more powerful, technologically advanced and experienced, her options will increase and Peking will find other strategies more suitable to her purpose.

(U) It is particularly important to note that there is no compelling reason for the growth of China's naval power to follow in the footsteps of other naval powers. Peking has expressed the opinion that to follow the old path of technical development of other countries is to crawl after others, and therefore China must break convention and learn from advanced experience as much as possible. (New China News Agency 28 December 1969)

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III. ROLE OF THE SUBMARINE IN PRC NAVAL STRATEGY

(U) The PRC submarine force has progressed from its inauspicious beginning with eight obsolescent Soviet submarines to a primarily indigenous force of about sixty submarines. This submarine force remains, for the time being, a defensive one and must still be considered in the traditional concept of a weapon platform used by an inferior naval power in an attempt to cope with a more powerful naval force. The fact that Peking places major emphasis on the production of submarines does not, however, imply satisfaction with her inferior naval position. The successful deployment of nuclear powered submarines has destroyed the traditional concept of submarine employment because nuclear powered submarines are not just effective offensive weapons but are also the main strength of superpower navies. The deployment of nuclear powered submarines by the PRC may be the event which initiates the change in PRC naval strategy from defensive to offensive.

(U) From a conceptual standpoint, the rationale for the development of an SSN force has historically been a combination of the following factors: defense in depth, interdiction of sea lanes, protection of ocean commerce, countering the SSBN threat of potential enemies and prestige. The following is a discussion of these factors in light of Peking's naval strategy and political objectives:

A. Defense In Depth

(U) Chinese submarine operations have taken place almost entirely within 100 miles of mainland China where the water depth reaches a maximum of about 500 feet and is generally much shallower. Shallow water increases the danger of high-speed submerged operations because of the dangers of bottoming and places significant limitations on the otherwise remarkable capabilities of a modern, high-speed, nuclear powered submarine. Furthermore, coastal operations require neither the endurance nor ranging capability of a nuclear submarine. Without the requirement for any of the advantages of an SSN, the cost effectiveness of such a program is open to serious question.

(U) The capabilities of a medium range, diesel-powered submarine such as the Chinese-built ROMEO Class are considerable. A ROMEO Class submarine on a covert patrol (submerged/snorkeling) could easily travel a distance of 3,000 nm and remain at sea for 30 days. A routine patrol, (considerably less than a maximum capability), might be in an area 1,200 nm from home port with up to 600 nm of "loiter time" within the patrol area. Allowing six days transit time in each direction,

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such a patrol would permit 18 days on station. Figure 1 shows the area included within 1,200 nm range arcs from Yulin and Shanghai. These patrol areas could be further expanded if the PRC chose to develop a submarine base on one of the islands in the South China Sea; however, any further expansion, by virtue of the geographical areas encompassed, almost in itself implies offensive operations.

(U) The idea of employing a fleet of SSNs to provide defense in depth has most likely been postponed by Peking until such time as it becomes necessary to expand submarine operations beyond the inherent capability of conventionally powered submarines.

B. Interdiction of Sea Lanes

(U) The second reason for a nuclear powered attack submarine force, the interdiction of sea lanes, is an offensive tactic and probably not currently of primary concern to the PRC except for those sea lanes within her defensive perimeter. All sea lanes within this defensive perimeter could be controlled by ROMEO Class submarines.

(U) On a larger scale, a fleet of Chinese SSNs maintaining a presence in the vicinity of U.S. 7th Fleet units could be assessed as a threat which requires the U.S. to maintain or even reinforce its presence in the western Pacific. Such a decision by the U.S. would be counter-productive for Peking which views a U.S. withdrawal from Asia as a necessity for the fulfillment of China's political ambitions.

C. Protection of Ocean Commerce

(U) The PRC merchant fleet is growing in size, expanding its operations, and becoming more modern in response to Peking's attempt to spread Chinese influence and prestige around the world. This expansion requires a degree of freedom and security of international sea lanes which would overtax the PRC navy of today. Such security would require the combined efforts of powerful, long ranging, surface vessels, an air capability which would at least deny air superiority to an enemy and a long range submarine force. The PRC does not appear intent upon developing the requisite surface and air forces for such a task and it is unlikely that they would build SSNs for such a role without them. For the present, China appears satisfied that the parity between superpower navies will keep the international sea lanes open for all to use.

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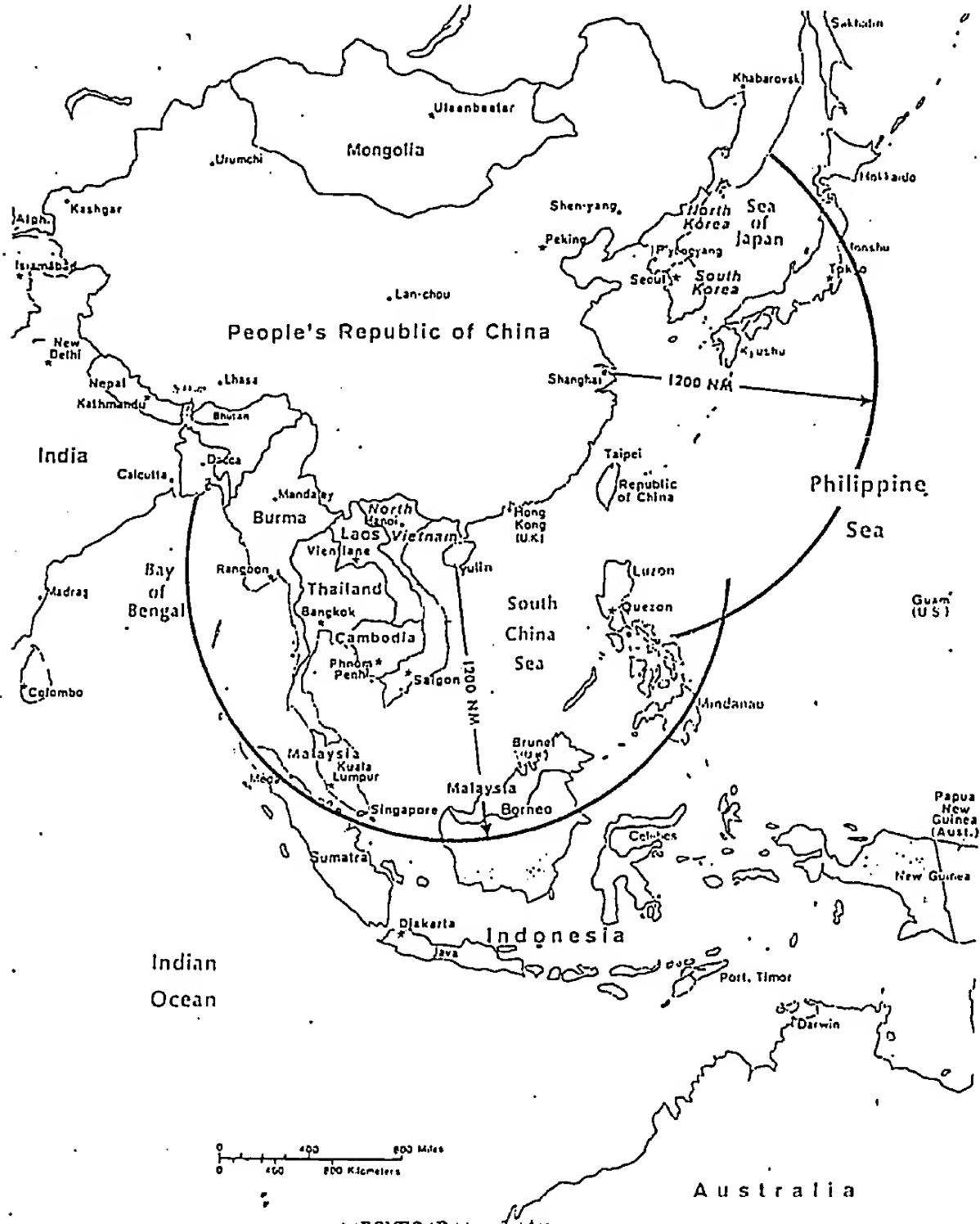


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D. Countering The SSBN Threat of Potential Enemies

(U) For the PRC to build, maintain, and crew with trained professionals, a fleet of SSNs which could seriously contend with the Soviet or U.S. SSBN threat is highly improbable. Peking's only countermeasure against an SSBN threat (actual or imagined) is deterrence. Peking is aware that neither the Soviets nor the U.S. has been able to deploy an SSN force which is capable of neutralizing the other's SSBN force and is realistic enough to avoid a similar tactic.

E. Prestige

(U) In view of the absence of a strategic or tactical requirement, we are left with "prestige" as the motivating force behind a PRC SSN building program. It may be concluded that the prestige derived from the implied operational capabilities of an SSN is largely due to its nuclear propulsion system. While this prestige would apply equally well to any nuclear powered submarine it is enhanced by an order of magnitude in the case of the SSBN.

IV. THE CASE FOR THE SSBN

(U) One of Peking's problems is the level of economic resources and GNP allocation to military programs at the expense of agricultural production, light industry and consumer goods. The quickest, easiest, and most economical avenue towards fulfillment of China's military oriented, national objectives is with an SSBN force. A Chinese SSBN force because of its value as both a strategic deterrent and offensive weapon system would maximize the cost effectiveness of capital and resources, provide a forceful back-up in the event of nuclear blackmail, and elevate China's international status and prestige to a level exponentially above the actual strategic value of such a system.

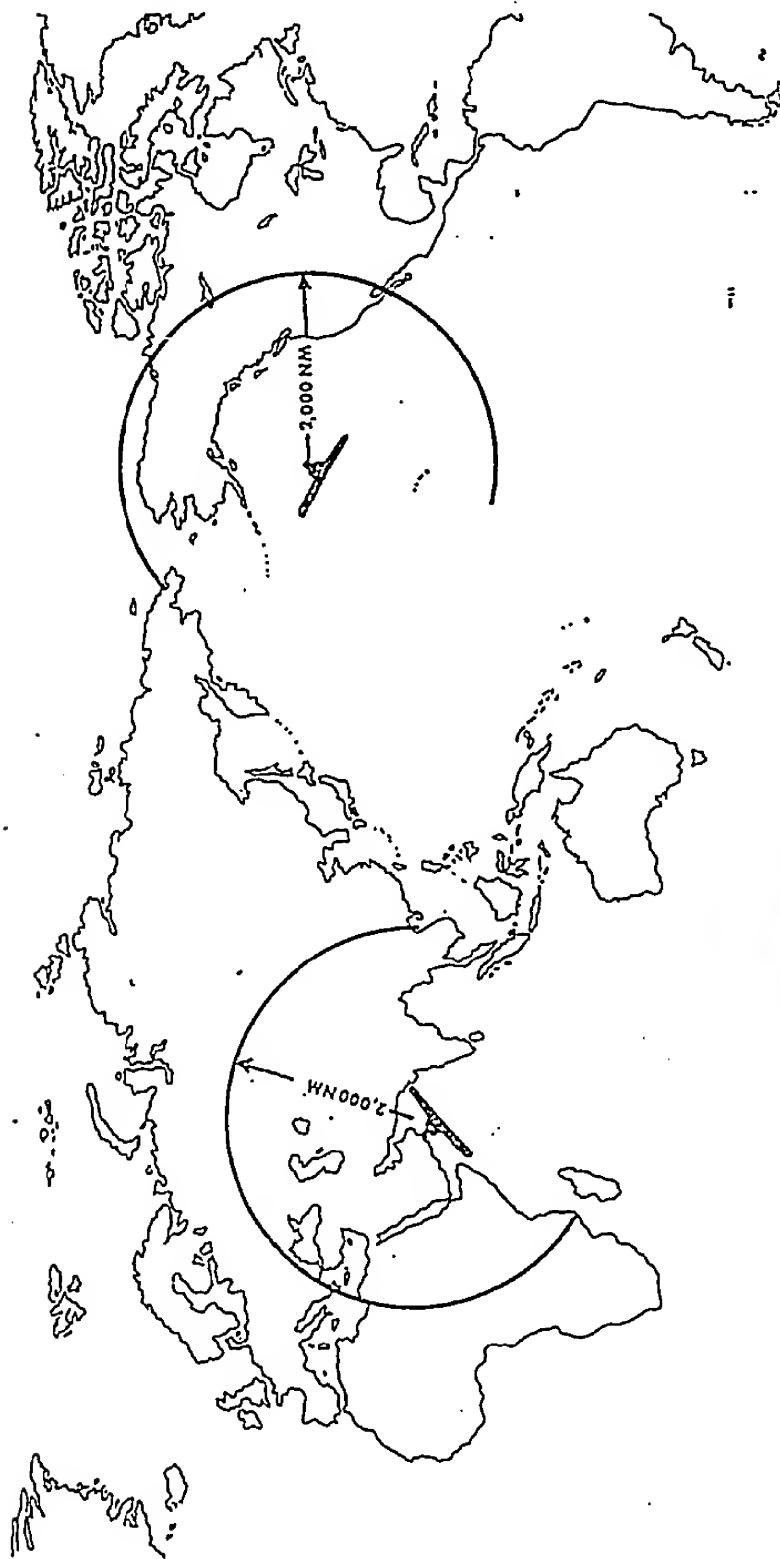
(U) The area which could be targeted by a SSBN equipped with a 2,000 nm missile system is shown in Figure 2. It is significant to note that European Russia can be targeted from the Indian Ocean and that Hawaii and continental U.S. are within 2,000 nm of an area readily accessible from the Chinese mainland. China's economic, military and, more specifically, naval aid to Tanzania, Sri Lanka and Pakistan takes on added dimension when viewed in the light of their potential as friendly ports for Chinese SSBN operations in the Indian Ocean. A similar argument can be made that Chinese Naval aid to Albania is ultimately intended for SSBN support for Mediterranean operations in the very distant future.

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SSBN Strike Arcs

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Figure 2

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V. THE CHINESE VIEW OF THE SSBN AS A DETERRENT

(U) It is generally accepted by Westerners that a deterrent force can only be effective if its capability is known to potential adversaries and its effectiveness continually proven. However, from the xenophobic viewpoint of the Chinese, a paucity of information available to potential enemies will not necessarily reduce credibility and indeed might well result in an over-estimation of Chinese capability. To assume that a lack of publicity concerning nuclear submarine production, submerged launch ballistic missile systems, etc., implies the Peking is not interested in such systems, is not developing such systems, or that such a system would not be employed as a deterrent until its capabilities are "proven" would be a serious error.

(U) It is suggested that from the Chinese point of view the deployment of an SSBN, even of unproven operational capability and carrying missiles of unknown potential, would create sufficient "apprehension" in U.S. and Soviet minds as to effectively end the era when either could make nuclear threats against China with impunity. The high survivability of the SSBN has unquestionably established credibility as a strategic deterrent to hostilities. This "defensive" connotation can be exploited by Peking to avoid unfavorable publicity and is consistent with PRC claims that they will maintain a position of "no first use" of nuclear weapons and that their development of such weapons is strictly for defensive purposes. Typical of these claims is the 4 October 1969 statement from the New China News Agency following the two nuclear tests in September:

"The conducting of necessary and limited nuclear tests and the development of nuclear weapons by China are entirely for the purpose of defense and for breaking the nuclear monopoly....At no time and in no circumstances will China be the first to use nuclear weapons."

VI. WHY NOT RELY ON MRBM/ICBM/SSB

(U) For a nation to have an effective nuclear deterrent its total system must also deter limited nuclear attacks. The addition of this requirement makes the acquisition of a variety of weapons and delivery systems a necessity. Similarly, a variety of deterrent systems are necessary to ensure that no one defensive system or technological breakthrough will eliminate the basic capability of nuclear retaliation. The multiplicity of launch areas available to an SSBN provides a variety in

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itself and generally makes it more difficult and costly to defend against the system than for the system to place a warhead over a target. Ultimately, however, it is the assured retaliation which distinguishes the SSBN system and although a force of MRBM/ICBMs fit into an overall deterrent package, they are neither sufficient by themselves nor can they, by sheer number, replace an SSBN fleet.

(U) A deterrent force based on conventionally powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBs) would be unacceptable because Peking would lose the international prestige that comes with the deployment of nuclear powered units as well as severely limiting the range and endurance capabilities of the system platform. To produce SSBs as an interim deterrent force is not likely because it would considerably lessen the international impact of the eventual SSBN deployment and place undue strain on the Chinese economy. It is believed that the sole Chinese GOLF Class submarine is an R & D vessel and that additional units will not be produced.

VII. SUMMARY

(U) In summary, the PRC initially inherited a defensive naval strategy from the Soviets and with minor adjustments molded its naval force into a logical extension of MAO's "guerrilla" force, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Submarines, gunboats and missile boats provided the PLA with a naval force which could operate in accordance with MAO's hit-and-run guerrilla theory. It is considered most likely that the decision to progress directly from this guerrilla type naval force to a strategic, nuclear deterrent force was made shortly after the Sino-Soviet rift and that the PRC has been working on the various phases of an SLBM program since the mid-1960's. The appearance of China's first SSBN may well be in the offing.

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